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Secrets and public decisions

This is another of those times so frequent in recent years of public questioning of the purposes and wisdom of US involvement abroad — in Lebanon, in Central America, and now in Grenada. Once again Americans need the perspective provided by the informed views of professionals who were intimately involved in establishing government policy in these or similarly challenging previous instances.

Unfortunately, future public access to this knowledge is in some jeopardy from a complex presidential directive. It would require approximately 112,000 former-top government officials to submit to the then-current administration for approval any writing they planned to publish which related to specific intelligence subjects. Information which the government then said was classified would have to be deleted.

Presumably most writings by former top officials would touch upon information that was once considered highly sensitive.

Such pre-publication scrutiny now applies to former members of the CIA and the National Security Agency. The administration would broaden it to other government officials who have been cleared-for access to supersecret information.

This appears to be a well-intentioned effort to stem the leaking of government secrets which might damage aspects of national security, imperil secret operations under way, or endanger the lives of Americans or other nationals who gather intelligence. These aims are important and need to be achieved.

However, the directive goes too far. It would inhibit many former high-ranking officials — the very ones who have the most to offer — from sharing their knowledge with the public. If enforced by overly zealous officials, the effects could verge on censorship. The issue goes be-

yond the First Amendment's right of free speech to the public's right and need to know. In a democracy the decisions an electorate makes are only as good as the information it has.

The Reagan administration should reconsider this directive. Instead of such a sweeping provision it should increase modestly and selectively the number of persons covered by pre-publication scrutiny.

For instance, former members of the National Security Council and some of the White House staff might be included, as proposed by Adm. Stansfield Turner, former head of the CIA, and by others. The final decision on which officials to include should be based on the kind and amount of security material to which each person has had access.

Any such plan should have an appeals process, in cases of disagreement as to whether information is properly classified as still highly secret. The Reagan proposal would have the courts fill that function, as today they do in the scrutiny of writings by former CIA and NSA officials.

Others propose that instead of the unseemly spectacle of former officials suing their government, it would be preferable and less expensive for the two sides to agree to binding arbitration, or some such relatively simple method of adjudication. It is an idea worth considering.

In a democracy it is never easy to find the proper balance between the public's need to know and the government's need to retain important secrets. Disagreements are inevitable, and probably a good thing.

The Reagan administration may well be correct that things now are out of balance, with too many secrets having been improperly divulged in recent years. But pushing the pendulum too far to the other side is not the right answer either. There must be balance.